

**Testimony of Dr. Bernard Taylor, Jr. on SB 344 and SB345**  
**Superintendent of Schools**  
**Grand Rapids Public Schools**  
**May 4, 2011**

Chairman Pavlov and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bills 344 and 355.

Since I was appointed Superintendent in 2006, we have implemented bold, innovative and sometimes even controversial educational reforms designed to significantly increase student achievement and provide students and parents with high quality school choices.

One of our most successful initiatives has been the "Centers of Innovation." The purpose of our "Centers of Innovation" process is to foster public-private partnerships in order to develop innovative new school choices based on proven research and successful school models. These schools are predominantly established as "pilot schools" with different work rules, different job descriptions and expectations, such as extended instruction time, additional professional development and training, more collaborative planning time, and more.

We know that building the right team and maintaining stability and cohesiveness around the right school model and vision is at the core of successful schools. Unfortunately, our budget crisis has led to frequent – and sometimes large – district wide layoffs that have created much displacement and disruption for all schools.

It seems like every other year, we are forced to issue layoffs, thus completely reshuffling the deck of teachers and support staff in schools, classrooms and grades based on the individual's Tenure and/or seniority.

Grand Rapids University Prep Academy - our very first "Center of Innovation" – is a prime example of this problem.

Grand Rapids UPrep is based on the Detroit UPrep school – an independent charter school with a proven model that has produced 90%+ graduation rates and 90%+ post-secondary enrollment rates. The model is simple. Keep class sizes small at around 18 to 1 ratio. Establish teachers as advisors who remain with a class/cohort of students over multiple grade level – building relationships with the students and their families and deepening knowledge of the student's academic readiness. UPrep was originally

planned as an independent charter and was positioned to open as such – something I learned on the second day of my career here.

We were able to work with the Uprep founders and spent considerable time outlining why it is best for the school to be developed in partnership within the GRPS system. This led to the development of the Centers of Innovation process and in 2008, UPrep opened as a GRPS pilot school beginning with grades 6 and 7. We developed the job descriptions, conducted interviews, hired and trained the inaugural team of seven teachers who were going to be the very basis for growth and success of the school. A lot of time, money and extra effort went into professional development, team building, and developing ownership of the Uprep model.

The first year flew by and everything was going according to plan. Then we hit another financial cliff and our budget situation forced a district wide lay off. As a result, every UPrep teacher was displaced and only two returned the next year. The model that students, parents, teachers and the staff bought into was disrupted and broken before it even had the time to really grow up and get going.

This problem is not limited to just UPrep. It is an issue that impacts every single school in the district – Centers of Innovation, Theme Schools and comprehensive school.

Now, as we stare down the barrel of a \$23 million budget shortfall, we face the likelihood of another district wide lay off -- and yet another round of displacement teachers and school staff and disruption that impacts all schools and worse yet all students.

Our students and parents are frustrated. Our teachers are frustrated. And as important, our public-private partners like Spectrum Health, Christman, Steelcase, and others are increasingly frustrated and are questioning their investments.

We are asking the Legislature and Governor to make limited, surgical, very targeted changes to the Tenure Act and Public Employee Relations Action in order to provide our school district with the maximum flexibility and tools to protect our reforms and innovative school models – to protect our students, parents, teachers, and partners from any more disruption and to provide the necessary stability and consistency to allow our reforms to take root, to grow, and eventually be spread and shared across the district.

We want to thank Senator Hildebrand for introducing this legislation and we urge this committee to please pass Senate Bills 344 and 345.